

The Wilderness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 February 2023

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] This is the first Sunday of the season of Lent, as we said at the beginning of the service. And this period of 40 days is patterned after Jesus, who at the start of His ministry, immediately following His baptism, where He is recognized as the only begotten Son of God, the voice of God speaks over Him, the Holy Spirit descends on Him.

And immediately after that, He goes into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days. And in Scripture, the wilderness plays an extremely important role in the lives of God's people.

In one sense, the wilderness is a desolate place. Imagine a kind of desert where not much can grow or thrive. But you don't have to actually go physically anywhere to be in the wilderness.

Whenever you are stripped of your familiar comforts and routines, whenever your life feels out of control, whenever you are beset by trials and temptations, or whenever you have to face and fear the unknown, these are markers of being in the wilderness.

I imagine some of you are in the wilderness right now in your lives. And being in the wilderness is a unique time in our lives when it happens because it cuts through our self-deception.

[1 : 3 7] It's a time that really exposes the truth about us, the truth about our hearts, the truth about what we're really trusting. And because of that, as hard as it is to be in the wilderness, it can also be a time of profound spiritual transformation.

And so every Christian in our life, every Christian, will find ourselves in the wilderness in one time or another. And if you're here and you're not a Christian, you're not sure what you think, this is a way that I would invite you to make sense of those experiences in your life.

Because whenever we're in the wilderness, it means God wants to do business with us. It means God is trying to tell us something. So it's always a time to stop and ask, what is God doing in this moment through these experiences in my life?

What do I need to hear and receive from Him? So tonight we're going to look at this passage in Matthew chapter 4. I want to walk us through the passage briefly, and then we're going to see three things about this time in the wilderness and the temptations that Jesus faces.

We're going to see the danger of these temptations, the true danger, I mean. We're going to see the meaning of Jesus' victory means more than it appears. And then we're going to see the message for us as we find ourselves in the wilderness now or at some point in the future.

[2 : 5 8] Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that, as always, You have the power and the desire to speak to us, not just through words written 2,000 years ago, but through these words to us here and now in the place we find ourselves.

We pray that that would happen because of Your Spirit. We know it can. We pray that through it we would be drawn into Your embrace, that in seeing the truth about ourselves, we would come more clearly to see the truth about You and Your love for us.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So first, let's walk through this passage in Matthew chapter 4. If you have a Bible, you can open it, or a smartphone, you can open it to look at this.

It says in Matthew chapter 4 verse 1, then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And it's worth noting that there's something very intentional happening here.

The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. Why? To be tempted by the devil. It's not that that just happens arbitrarily.

[4 : 08] The entire reason that Jesus goes into the wilderness is to be tempted by the devil. And then it says in verse 2, And after fasting 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry.

Maybe the biggest understatement in Scripture, right? If you wrote after fasting 40 days and 40 nights about me, it would say, And He was dead. But Jesus is hungry.

And it says... And there's a reason why we need to focus in on that. There's an acronym. If any of you have ever been in the addiction recovery world, there's this acronym that you will hear again and again and again, HALT.

Stands for hungry, angry, lonely, tired. The whole idea is if I'm trying to recover from addiction, I need to particularly pay attention to any time that I'm hungry, any time that I'm angry, any time that I'm feeling lonely, any time that I'm tired.

Because those are times when I am particularly vulnerable to temptation. So those are times when you need to halt, take stock, and make sure that you don't relapse, right? So after fasting 40 days and 40 nights, Jesus is extremely vulnerable to temptation.

[5 : 14] If there was ever a time when Jesus might give in, it would be now. And then Matthew tells us three ways that Jesus is tempted. First, Satan says, Hey, I know you're hungry.

Why don't you turn these stones into bread? You know, there's a lot of hungry people in the world. I'm sure they would really appreciate that. Jesus refuses. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Then Satan takes Jesus to Jerusalem. And he puts him on the roof of the temple, and he says, Why don't you jump off this roof and survive? That would be amazing.

Show everybody what you're capable of. Show them that you're more than you seem. Everyone would believe in you then. And then he quotes Scripture.

He quotes Psalm 91. He's using Scripture to proof text his argument. Satan loves to proof text. Jesus refuses. It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.

[6 : 19] Then finally, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and he says, All of this can be yours if you but worship me. Jesus refuses. Be gone, Satan, for it is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall use her.

So what's happening here in this interaction? On the one level, these temptations are temptations that I think, if we're honest, are pretty familiar to most of us.

We all face temptation when it comes, firstly, to our appetites, right? Our physical desires for food or for drink or for sex or for pleasure, gratification, material consumption.

We all face those temptations. We all face temptation when it comes to our vulnerability. You know, that's really what the second temptation is about. It's about taking measures to ensure that we don't have to be vulnerable to pain and suffering.

You know, safety and comfort, whether it be for me or the people I love, my family, my kids, those can be great sources of temptation. And then our powerlessness.

[7 : 32] You know, whether you actively seek glory and fame or merely just want a sense that you have some measure of control over your life and over your future, over outcomes, power is also a great source of temptation.

So, on one level, these are familiar, normal temptations that every human being faces, but there's much more going on here. Notice that Satan begins his temptation by saying, if you are the Son of God.

He's intentionally trying to get Jesus to doubt that very thing. He's taking aim at Jesus' identity and purpose.

And then look at the nature of the temptations themselves. Make bread from stones, Jesus. You don't have to be hungry. I know you're hungry, but you don't have to be hungry.

Jump off this temple and be rescued. You don't have to be vulnerable. You feel very vulnerable and exposed. You don't have to feel that way. Rule the world, Jesus.

[8 : 39] You don't have to be powerless. Do you see what all of these temptations have in common and where this is going? You don't have to suffer, Jesus.

You don't have to suffer. You don't have to do what your Father sent you here to do, Jesus. What kind of Father would do that?

You don't have to do it, Jesus. You don't have to serve his purposes. You don't have to do it his way. You don't have to go to the cross.

There's another way. There's a way that goes around Calvary. I know a shortcut. It'll get you there a lot quicker. You know, we're not told exactly what Jesus sees in that third temptation when the devil takes him to the mountaintop.

It simply says that the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world. But I think that it is entirely possible that Satan shows Jesus a vision of the future. Not just all of the kingdoms that exist in the first century, but all of the kingdoms of the world that will exist throughout history.

[9 : 56] I think it's entirely plausible that the devil showed him a future in which everything else would play out exactly as Jesus had intended, exactly as the Father had planned.

I think it's entirely possible that Satan shows Jesus a future where Jesus would go on to perform extraordinary miracles. He would establish the church.

He would establish the Christian faith. He would amass billions and billions of fathers. His name would be praised and worshipped all around the world.

Christianity would become the greatest global religion. They would do extraordinary good in the world. They would fight injustice. They would build orphanages. They would care for the poor and the sick.

They would liberate the oppressed. They would cure diseases. And they would spread love and kindness all through the world. There would be peace and prosperity for all of God's people. It would be everything that Jesus had come to accomplish with just one little tiny adjustment.

[10 : 59] No cross. He offers Jesus a chance to be Lord but without having to be Savior.

This would be Satan's greatest victory of all. It's nothing like the caricatures of evil that we so often see in pop culture when we might imagine a kind of satanic, dystopian future with the fire and the torture and all of that.

It's nothing like that. Here is this satanic, dystopian future. A Christian church doing full of Christian people doing all kinds of Christian things but without the cross.

People who genuinely believe they are doing good for God who are actually in service to Satan. So this is the real danger behind these temptations.

Satan's plan is not necessarily to prevent Christianity from emerging. It's not to eradicate the possibility of Christianity. It's to establish a Christian church that is completely impotent.

[12 : 29] A crossless Christianity. This is what's on the table. These are the stakes. As with the temptations, when we look at the meaning of Jesus' victory, there's much more going on here than meets the eye.

Because this, my friends, is not the first time we have seen temptations like this at work. The very first example of temptation happened in the garden in Genesis chapter 3.

God has told Adam that he and Eve may eat of the fruit of any tree in the garden except for the one that is in the midst of the garden. But He doesn't give a reason. How frustrating would that be?

He doesn't give a reason for the command. They simply have to trust Him. They simply have to take it at His word. But the serpent says, essentially, you don't need God to decide good and evil.

You can decide for yourselves good and evil. In fact, that's what the fruit is for. All you have to do is eat the fruit, and then you can make these decisions on your own.

[13 : 41] And then it says the woman looked, and it says in verse 6, saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.

And we see echoes of the same temptations Jesus faced around hunger and comfort and power. It looks good. It appeals to the appetite. And if I had the kind of power and wisdom this would offer me, then I could make these decisions for myself.

I would be wise. I wouldn't have to be vulnerable and powerless and dependent on God anymore. We see these echoes of the same temptations. And then, of course, we know the story.

They eventually gave in to the temptations. They eat the fruit, and the world falls into sin and brokenness as a result. These human beings who God placed there to rule over creation in His name, in fact, turned creation over.

They did the one thing a ruler should never do. They turned their land over to the enemy. So then God sets a plan in motion to restore creation through Israel, and He promises Abraham that one day He's going to turn His descendants into a great nation, and He's going to bless them, and He's going to bless all of the nations through them.

[14 : 56] And then God raises up this nation of Israel. He sets them free from slavery in Egypt. He brings them out into the wilderness for 40 years of preparation so that they can enter the promised land and become that blessing to the nations.

But Israel faces the same temptations around appetite and vulnerability and power. They're hungry and thirsty, and they fail to trust in God's provision.

They say, it would be better if we just went back to Egypt. We're going to starve out here, even though God miraculously provides food for them. They're terrified of their enemies. They send spies into the promised land, and they see the enemies that they're up against, and they're terrified.

And they say, we cannot possibly win. And they feel so vulnerable and exposed, and they feel weak and powerless. And so they build a golden calf. They build a God they can worship who will make them feel strong and powerful rather than foolish, a God they can be proud of.

And here's where we begin to see the real meaning behind this battle in the wilderness between Jesus and the devil. Listen to this parallel.

[16 : 13] This is no coincidence. God brought Israel, who He refers to as His firstborn son in Exodus 4, out of Egypt, through the waters of the Red Sea, and into the wilderness for 40 years to be tested by Him and tempted by the evil one.

And here in Matthew, what happens? God brings Jesus, His only begotten Son, up out of Egypt, because that's where they had been living as refugees until Herod died.

And then Jesus passes through the waters of baptism, and then He is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days to be tested by God and tempted by the evil one.

Matthew is very intentional about creating this parallel. He's making a very profound theological statement about the purpose of Jesus' ministry.

And there's more. Each time Satan tempts Jesus, Jesus responds by quoting Scripture. So we could say we should combat temptation in our own lives by quoting Scripture.

[17 : 24] Absolutely. But there's more going on here. Every time Jesus quotes Scripture, He's quoting from a very particular book, the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is a book that summarizes all of the instructions God had given the Israelites during their time in the wilderness.

But where Israel failed to uphold what was written in Deuteronomy, and they gave in to temptation, Jesus remains faithful.

He quotes Deuteronomy, and then He remains true to God's Word. And so what we see is that Jesus is doing much more than merely overcoming personal temptation in His own life.

Jesus is recapitulating the story of Adam and the story of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus is succeeding where Adam failed.

As Paul says, Jesus comes as the second Adam, the true Adam, to do what the first Adam failed to do. Jesus succeeds where Israel failed.

[18 : 32] Jesus comes as the true Israel to succeed where Israel failed. And so we could look at this and we could say, well, what does this mean for us?

This means that we could simply take Jesus' example, and now we go out and we try to overcome temptation the way Jesus did. No, this is saying much more than that. This is saying Jesus' victory over temptation stands in place of our failure.

Where we do fail, would fail, will fail. Jesus never fails. His victory stands in the place of all human failure.

And then instead of forsaking the cross, Jesus fulfills His purpose by dying on the cross. And then in Colossians chapter 2 verses 15, we see why Satan was so determined to prevent the cross by any means necessary.

Paul says that on the cross, Jesus did what? He disarmed the rulers and authorities, and He put them to open shame by triumphing over them in Him.

[19 : 47] In other words, He disarmed Satan. Satan no longer has any power over those who put their faith in Jesus.

Because listen to this. It's very important for us to understand this. Satan believes the gospel. Satan knows and believes every word of Scripture.

Satan's doctrine is rock solid. Satan knows that all human beings have sinned and fallen short of God's standards. Satan knows that all human beings will eventually crumble to temptation.

And Satan knows that apart from the cross, there can be absolutely no forgiveness of sin because God is a God of justice. And so Satan is someone who stands and points to us as we crumble under temptation and says, See God?

I knew they would fail. You knew they would fail. Now justice must be done. And so apart from the cross, the world remains under His control.

[20 : 57] So a Christian church without a cross would be a church in service to Satan. It would be the church of Satan. But the cross changes everything.

Because of the cross, we can find forgiveness that comes through faith. Paul says in Colossians, in that same place, that God takes the record of our debt and nails it to the cross.

So when Satan stands with the finger of accusation pointed at us, God takes that record of debt and He nails it to the cross.

Because of the cross, we can receive all of the blessings that were promised to Adam, all of the blessings that were promised to Israel. They all are fulfilled and received through Jesus' perfect obedience.

And then in that, we receive the Holy Spirit and all of the spiritual resources. You can read about that in Ephesians chapter 6. All of the spiritual resources necessary to confront the spiritual forces of darkness that hold this world captive, to confront the temptation in our own lives.

[22 : 09] And that is the meaning of Jesus' victory. It stands in place of our failure. So what do we take from this?

Well, there's bad news and good news. If you know anything about Christianity, there's always bad news and good news. And by accepting and hearing the bad news, that prepares us and opens us to receive the good news, which is always far better.

Here's the bad news. The temptations that confronted Jesus in the wilderness continue to confront the church to this very day. Our desire for endless material consumption instead of caring for those in need.

Our desire for a religion that is safe and comfortable, a shortcut around suffering and sacrifice, continues to tempt us.

Desire for political power and cultural influence and relevance, instead of humility and obscurity, continues to tempt us.

[23 : 16] You know, one might argue, I've heard people like Russell Moore make this argument, that these temptations really lay behind the collapse of the evangelical church currently happening in North America.

I will certainly say that these are temptations that I face. Not just as a pastor, but as a Christian. As a husband, as a dad, somebody trying to live out my faith in D.C.

Every single day, I face these temptations. And of course, there's always behind all of that the temptation to have Christianity without the cross. Right?

To have, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. Baptism without church discipline. Communion without our confession of faith.

Absolution without personal confession of sin. Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer says, is grace without discipleship. It's grace without the cross.

[24 : 19] It's grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. That's the bad news. Here's the good news. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, which we will if we don't already, whether it's because we are observing a Lenten fast, you know, Lent is in many ways a voluntary entering into a wilderness of sorts, whether it's because of that or because it's circumstances outside of our control.

If you look around and you find yourself in the wilderness, you are beset by trials and temptations and struggle and hardship. You are facing the unknown. You are full of fear and anxiety. Everything seems bleak.

You don't know where God is. You don't know what you're supposed to be doing. If you're in the wilderness, here's the good news. We will never have to face what Jesus faced because we will never have to do it alone.

Jesus, as Scripture calls Him, is our great high priest who has gone before us, who has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. And as the author of Hebrews says, Jesus, who always goes with us into the wilderness, it says in verse 15, we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

So there's nothing that we can go through in the wilderness where Jesus will not look at us and say, I've been there. I've been there.

[26 : 03] And in the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus strengthens us to resist. And there will be times when we succeed and praise God and celebrate that.

And there will be times when we fail. And when we fail, the author of Hebrews says, those are the times when we draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in that time of need.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You for Your victory. We thank You that we are not here to be told to go out and to do our best.

We thank You that instead we are here to celebrate Your victory, to praise You and glorify You for doing what we could never do. And then through our union with You, through our relationship with You, to share in the blessings of Your victory.

And we pray that that victory would be more and more true of us and more and more realized in our lives. We pray that for all of us who are beset, who are struggling, that we would find rest for our weary souls in Your victory.

[27 : 27] that everything that we put our hope in has already been accomplished for us. That we are here merely to receive what You offer and then to live it out, Lord.

We pray this would be true of us. We pray that this would be a blessing to us. We pray that it would help us become more the kind of people who radiate this love and grace into the world. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen.